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SUBJECT: USNS COMFORT VISIT DAZZLES ANTIGUA

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) The May 5-16 goodwill visit of the U.S. Navy Hospital Ship Comfort to Antigua and Barbuda drew rave reviews from every corner of the country. The visit directly touched over 55,000 lives -- well over half the population of the country -- along with numerous others through community relations events and other projects. According to Antigua's opposition leader, the Comfort vastly outperformed years of Cuban medical assistance to Antigua "in one fell swoop," and reset opinions in the country about America's commitment to the region following a decade of perceived neglect. Visits such as this are among our most effective diplomatic tools in the region and should continue to be deployed liberally. End summary.

¶2. (U) The USNS Comfort, a hospital ship, visited Antigua and Barbuda May 5-16 following visits to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. During the eleven-day stay, the Comfort treated over 12,000 patients (including the Prime Minister and senior government figures) and provided additional health care services to almost 43,000 additional people. The more than 55,000 "encounters" represent nearly two-thirds of the population of this twin-island nation, and just over one-third of all the encounters for the entire deployment -- making Antigua by far the largest beneficiary of the Comfort's services on a per capita basis.

¶3. (U) In addition to medical services, the crew of the Comfort, along with NGOs and international guests on board, conducted outreach events, made donations of equipment and supplies, and engaged in numerous local community events including a Sports Day and a social event with local nurses. The Comfort was the talk of the island throughout its deployment, thanks to excellent media coverage. Tellingly, for a week and a half even the taxi drivers' mantra of "can you get me a visa?" was displaced by "can you get me an appointment on the ship?", and Comfort crew members attained almost rock star status. The deployment enjoyed strong support from both the government and the opposition, despite some organizational snafus in the planning stages. Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer and most of his cabinet attended both the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as a "Distinguished Visitors" lunch aboard the ship.

COMMENT

¶4. (U) The effectiveness of the visit, and the easily observable positive impact it had throughout the island, was perhaps best summed up by Opposition Leader Lester Bird, who told the Charge at the closing that "in one fell swoop, you have overcome years of Cuban medical assistance to this country" and reversed a decade-long feeling that Washington had forgotten about its neighbors along the third border. Bird's commentary, and the genuine gratitude that was exhibited throughout the island, was proof positive of the effectiveness of this medical diplomacy in winning hearts and minds in the region. A steady diet of this kind of outreach is exactly what the region needs to overcome the growing dollar diplomacy

influence of Venezuela and China and restore the United States as the "partner of choice" in the region.

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